Interview with Penelope (Penne) Laingen

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Foreign Service Spouse Series

PENELOPE (PENNE) LAINGEN

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

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Subject: The role of the spouse in the Foreign Service: The Iran Hostage Crisis

Q: Penne filled two sides of two one-hour tapes. She talked from 10 o'clock until after 12, and I am hardly on the tape at all. She did most of the talking. She was articulate and emotional. I'd never met her before, and it was a charming experience for me, because she was the first person that I do not know who I interviewed.

LAINGEN: A lot of women feel very strongly and they've had to be quiet, because of the new ways that are coming along in the Foreign Service. They are out — they are retired — yet they feel very strongly (about certain changes).

Q: But that's when you can speak out...when your spouse has no career vulnerability.

LAINGEN: (laughs) I'm waiting. This is premature.

Q: Well, actually, if he's retiring next year, this (interview) won't go into print until after he's out of the Service, and we do guarantee everyone.

LAINGEN: But the funny thing is that the older I get I don't really care. I mean, I do feel wives can make a difference, but I don't think they can make or break their husbands'

careers. If he's got it, he's got it. If he doesn't...it's too bad. You know, a lot of wives are much smarter than their husbands!

No, what I was going to say about Malta (where my husband was ambassador) was that we were the last family there, in a country that is 100% Catholic and very family-oriented. (We were succeeded by a woman ambassador without family and then a male ambassador who was divorced. I used to think that more care should be taken in the kind of representation we send to various countries, which would show a certain sensitivity to the host government and culture). We were a family (which was important to the Maltese), and even though it was in 1977 and I had, more or less, been told that I had been given my freedom — I didn't have any responsibilities even though I was the ambassador's wife; they weren't my responsibilities, they were my husband's. You know, that was the attitude of the seventies — I nevertheless went ahead with what I had to do and with what I was asked to do. But I didn't realize the seething anger that I was feeling, until finally FLO came along and they said there was some talk about rewriting the Directive. I think it came out of the Forum Report of 1977 where people were so unhappy with the Directive.

So, the ladies in the American community (in Malta) and I sat down and wrote a paper to FLO, and we felt, yes, the Directive should be rewritten to include those of us who really didn't have the freedom that others had (to do “our own thing”). Now, I notice in this paper of yours, here, which I thought was very interesting, where you say one lady talked to the Charg#'s wife and you told her that she cannot take over the CLO position until the ambassador comes. In other words, an ambassador's wife is still locked out of having employment. Is that...

Q: Apparently so. I don't have the CLO's Standard Operating Procedures, but as I recall I researched that before I put it in that letter and it did say that the wife of the Chief of Mission could not be CLO. And I tell you why. It would be conflict of interest, because she would be working for her husband.

LAINGEN: Well, I know, but see how hypocritical that is — the official policy — in regard to ambassadors' wives particularly. And this is what really stuck in my craw, because if we're being told in 1972 that we're as free as anybody else to be our own person and this is being encouraged in society when you're at home, to get out and get your own job, your own financial base, the Cinderella Couple and all this, but you have been preparing for twenty years to take over this role of leadership and suddenly — how can you be a leader when the troops have mutinied? There's nobody to lead and (there's no recognition that an ambassador's wife does not have the same options that others do). It's a very hypocritical situation.

I was sort of amused, in a way, by the incident recently when the (Canadian) Ambassador's wife slapped her social secretary. It was very interesting to me, because it recalled a time, going way back to my beginning in the Foreign Service. I mean, perhaps that slap should have been placed on the jowls of the Ambassador or the visiting (Canadian) Prime Minister or even, symbolically speaking, on the System. Because the social secretary is paid to get it right, but the ambassador's wife, if something goes wrong, gets the blame. So, there's something wrong with that System, it seems to me.

But, anyway, it reminded me of when I was in Pakistan, which was really my most difficult post. I had never been overseas. We went with a two-year-old and I had a baby there and a miscarriage. I had every kind of parasite known to man. I was going to name my children after them, you know — Amoebia-sis, Giardia — I thought they were lovely names! (laughs)

Q: Did you name them?

LAINGEN: Noooo (laughs).

Q: Of which they are eternally grateful (laughs).

LAINGEN: And the servants were just rock bottom as far as training and cultural differences. It was the most difficult post! And I remember a particular day the electricity went off all over town and stayed off all day, so therefore the air-conditioning was out. Our kitchen was 120 degrees and it looked like the Black Hole of Calcutta, because it had a kerosene stove which I couldn't cook on and I didn't know how to and the walls were covered with soot. My sixth cook had quit that day when I asked him to rinse out some table napkins. He said “I don't do dhobi work” and he walked out. My two-year-old had five-inch worms coming out of his little bottom, which made me weak in the knees, my baby had a staph infection, which he had picked up in the hospital, great big sores all over him at three weeks old, I had a breast infection, so I didn't feel so hot, and the boss's wife had called me and reprimanded me for being late the day before to a party at the Residence and the toilet had backed up and was flowing into the front yard, (it was an absolute cess pool).

Well, it was just one thing after another, when my husband called from the air-conditioned Embassy and he informed me that he was bringing out Tish Baldridge that evening for dinner. She was there to set up a visit for Mrs. Kennedy. So, the First Lady's Social Secretary was coming and I didn't have a social secretary to turn around and slap. I wheeled around and kicked the kitchen cupboard until my foot went through it. (laughs). I was so chagrined at myself. Today, I wouldn't put up with that. I would have told my husband: “Sorry, dear.” But in those days, we didn't, did we? We took it all on ourselves. We thought possibly there was something wrong with us that we couldn't cope.

Q: We swallowed it.

LAINGEN: We swallowed it. We were the good little girls, yes. And I really think Pakistan was where I came closest to a nervous breakdown. When I finally flew home with the two boys, all by myself, halfway around the world, which is something I would never be able

to do again, I remember my mother saying: “You're so hard. What's happened to you? You've changed.”

And the other thing which was difficult in Pakistan was that Bruce and I had been introduced by an ambassador who was a neighbor in Chevy Chase, and it turned out that he was the ambassador in Pakistan. Evidently, he had asked for us to come out there. He was delightful to us. His wife, I realized, was in a difficult position. It was her first time as an ambassador's wife. But she was playing a role (and wanted it made clear to me that she would not play favorites).

We arrived, we arrived the first night in Pakistan and had to go immediately to the Political Counselor's house for dinner. We had this little two-year-old, as I said, and he was really out of sorts, but in typical Foreign Service fashio— Thank goodness, our air freight had come, so I had this folding crib — we put it on the top of the car and drove to the Political Counselor's house with this baby, bedded him down there while I went to this dinner party. It was madness. Absolutely, madness. (But that's the way things were done in those days).

Then we were invited to the Residence for cocktails, and when I walked in, the ambassador was very sweet — “How are you? Nice to see you again?” and gave me a big kiss — but the wife — the hand was out, sort of like “kiss my hand, (I am royalty here”), and I knew that that was the way it was going to be between us — had to be all very proper. That was very, very difficult, and I had people say to me, we know that you're personal friends of them, but we've decided that we'd judge you for yourself and not for them. I mean, it was very, very awkward.

Q: Was that your first post?

LAINGEN: That was my first post. And in fear and trembling of dropping the right card, that sort of thing. No, it was pure hell, absolute hell. There were high points, I would say,

our child being born, Mrs. Kennedy's visit, and traveling up north, but it was four years of torture, a very, very difficult post.

Q: Do you want to elaborate on Mrs. Kennedy's visit? Because I sometimes wonder if the outside world realizes what an embassy or a consulate goes through when they have a CODEL or a Vice Presidential visit or a Secretary of State visit.

LAINGEN: Well, I certainly have many stories about that, too!

Q: Fine! We have all morning. (laughs).

LAINGEN: I've often thought I, you know, after the assassination of Jack Kennedy and the way Mrs. Kennedy positioned herself then, performed (and I do think it was a performance, a beautiful performance), I felt very remorseful about the way I felt about her.

Q: In Pakistan?

LAINGEN: In Pakistan. She did carry it off. She was a lovely-looking woman. I wouldn't say she had queenly appeal. She followed to Pakistan two queens — Queen Elizabeth and Queen Sirikit, two truly queenly women — troopers. Jackie Kennedy had more of a movie-star appeal to the Pakistanis. She was fascinating. Actually, my husband was the one with Tish Baldridge and his boss who set up the visit.

Q: He was Control Officer?

LAINGEN: Yes, and they would set up a program to go visit this mosque or a dinner party or something and the form would come back saying “she won't do this, she won't shake hands, she won't give gifts, she wants to take a nap at such and such a time.” And then, they would send another program — it went on like that for months. And I remember the ambassador saying, “well, if she's a basket case, why doesn't she stay home?” It was interesting, because he was quickly retired from that post. I don't know if it was because of that. At any rate, the new ambassador came and presented his credentials on a Tuesday

and Mrs. Kennedy arrived on Wednesday, so he didn't know anyone and had to really rely on my husband and David Linebaugh, the Political Counselor, to introduce him to people.

And what was so difficult was that Mrs. Kennedy was late to everything. I don't mean fifteen minutes late, I mean two hours late! There was no conception of the thousands of people lining the streets (in a dust storm) waiting for one glimpse of her. One little newswoman said to me: “I'm very perplexed about your Mrs. Kennedy. She seems to be an enigma. They say that she is a student of history and she loves art, and yet she is not going to see the Red Fort in Lahore, but is bypassing it and is only interested in the Horse Show. So, it was terribly interesting, the whole state visit. And yet with all the problems, of being late and the small details — her bobby pins, her frozen daiquiris, whatever it was she wanted — the impact that she had — it came off. I can still remember to this day the beautiful lemon brocade dress that she wore at the Shalimar Gardens. She was presented with a silver replica of the Shalimar Gardens, and it was the first time she had opened her mouth. No one had heard her speak and out came this little Marilyn Monroe, sort of whispery voice, and the women were looking around at each other thinking: “Oh, my goodness, this is just beyond us, how drippy.” But the men were totally fascinated, totally mesmerized (laughs) and, of course, this was just perfect. So, we said, all right. She has made the — she has skimmed the surface and done right.

She has taken — she wanted a private visit, but she has made it into a semi-state visit, and that's fine. It went off. But looking back now, I think she was young, she had young children, she was having miscarriages herself, her husband — now that we know, was fooling around — so I kind of admire her now, you know? She did present a certain charisma, they had charisma, they carried it off, and America was at its peak. And so, I'm not so critical, I guess, as I was then.

Q: We mellow with age, right?

LAINGEN: We really do. I think that's quite true.

Q: We become more understanding. I agree with you. I can understand perfectly how Mrs. Gotlieb felt the other night. However, she should have thrown bricks or kicked thekitchen cupboard, as you did, I guess.

LAINGEN: Yes, that's right. Poor thing. (laughs).

Q: Or kicked the press corps — no, not that. (laughs). Just for the record, where else did you serve? Malta?

LAINGEN: Bruce is older than I, so he had been in Hamburg, Germany, and in Iran (before we met). He came back to the States when we met, and he was on the Greek Desk, and then we went four years to Pakistan. We came home again. We've always had a post in between, at home, which has been wonderful, but I don't have a long list of countries as a result to say we've been in. Then we went three years to Afghanistan, where Bruce was Deputy Chief of Mission, back home again for six years, including one year at the National War College, and then as Ambassador to Malta. Then, before Bruce came home, he was head of the CSCE Conference in Malta in January 1979.

When he came home, he was going into the Inspection Corps and was within one week of going to South America when he was called to see if he would go to Iran — just for four to six weeks — to substitute for Charlie Naas, who had been in the first takeover of the Embassy in February 1979 and who was really in desperate need to get out. So, Bruce just went to tide him over until they decided whether they would have an ambassador there. He (Bruce) did such a good job, morale wise, that in the middle of the summer, they (the State Department) called and asked if he would stay and be ambassador to Iran. Bruce said, well, “I can't make a decision that way. I have to ask my family” and he said, “I'm coming home on consultation in September and then we'll talk it over.” Well, by the time he got home, they were having second thoughts about the relationship with Iran (so decided to have him return as Charg# on a temporary basis).

I remember his saying to me, something about the Shah coming into this country, and I said, “Now, wait a minute. You went over there (under the proviso or) I thought they were not going to bring the Shah into this country.” He said, “It's not a matter of 'if', but it's a matter of 'when'.” So, when he went back, he knew very well that he would be in trouble. In fact, he wrote a memo to that effect that if the Shah comes into the U.S., we will have a hostage situation on our hands. I remember that last day before he left, we went to a wedding. He didn't want to go to the reception and I insisted because they were very close friends. But he was totally preoccupied and I knew that he knew what he was going back to face. I look back on that with horror.

But then, he was going to come home by Halloween, then at Thanksgiving, and then, of course, he was taken hostage.

Q: I think on the fourth of November — my husband's birthday.

LAINGEN: Oh? (laughs) And Election Day.

Q: So, you were not in Iran? You were here.

LAINGEN: No, (the families were not allowed to be in Iran at that time. They had been evacuated in December 1978. Only working couples were allowed to be there, like the Staffords and Lijeks, who were brought out by the Canadians in February, 1980). But I had traveled to Iran from Afghanistan, and it's a funny thing, I never liked Iran. Bruce adored it. He loved it. And he always said, “You are being unfair, you never lived there and you don't know the people.” But I said, “I see it through the eyes of a white, infidel Christian woman.”

Q: I'm fascinated with what you're saying, because many of your reactions were exactly what mine were.

LAINGEN: It's funny. We loved Afghanistan even so, as a woman there. I mean, I would come in the gate perhaps with my arms full of groceries, and the servants would practically

knock me over to grab my husband's briefcase. He was the Burra Sahib, (Big Man), you see. But, in Iran, I was afraid. This is what I saw.

When we went to Meshed, which is the Holy City, where Bruce had been Consul eighteen years before, he wanted to go back — it's a lovely interesting town — we wanted to go into the mosque. I was perfectly amenable to cultural differences. I had taken my shoes off many places. In fact, I was wearing a chalwar chemise. I was very conservatively dressed. But, at any rate, we went into a tourist center and they threw the dirtiest, filthiest, greasiest chador at me and said: “You wear this!” It was belligerent, I could tell it. They hated me for standing there with my white, Christian infidel face hanging out, you see? (laughs) And I said, no. I'm not going to wear that dirty rag.

So, I went into a little material shop and I sat very quietly in a window(seat) there. The women would come in with these black chadors and I could see these beady eyes looking me up and down. And presently, a policeman came in and in perfect English he said to me, very harshly: “What do you want? What are you doing here?” I had obviously upset them tremendously. And I said “nothing, nothing, I'm waiting for my husband.” I put my head down rather demurely in trying, best I could (to be inconspicuous), but there was a terrible intolerance.

Q: What year was this?

LAINGEN: This was probably 1969 or 1970...

Q: Oh, so this is quite a bit before your husband went back a second time.

LAINGEN: This was the second time we went back to Iran. The third time was when he became a hostage. He had been posted (in Meshed and Teheran) from 1953 to 1955, before we met. Then, this was a trip, the second time. The third time, he went as a hostage.

Q: He went as a hostage?

LAINGEN: (laughs) He went as a Charg# and came out a hostage!

So, my experience in Iran was that, wherever we went, even in Teheran where a lot of women had been wearing French clothes. I still felt the prejudice against us. Maybe it was as Americans, but I felt it was as a woman or as a Christian woman. There was a tremendous air of intolerance. Funny thing is, I didn't feel that in Afghanistan. Now, perhaps the difference was that the Afghans are Sunni Moslems and the Iranians are Shiites. I don't know what the reason is, but you see, Bruce never felt that (prejudice) in Iran, and I don't think a man would recognize it.

Q: Because it didn't apply to him.

LAINGEN: It didn't apply to him at all. And if you are treated like a big sahib, you're not going to care what your wife is being treated as! (laughs)

Q: Can I ask you how you lived those 444 days?

LAINGEN: I was just thinking yesterday about that time in Pakistan that I told you about — the tremendous stress and the coming close to a nervous breakdown in Pakistan — almost made those 444 days a piece of cake. Frankly, no it wasn't, but how did I spend it? Well, I mainly spent it — you couldn't think about anything else. Let's face it. In my whole history of being connected to the Foreign Service, whenever I'd started a project, for instance — I am a writer and I had three chapters written in a novel and my teacher said “You have a real winner here and should get an agent now” — then, Bruce was taken hostage, so I put that away and I've not gotten back to it. I will someday, I hope. I had also upholstered a chair and I had everything but the back done when we went to Malta, (so I had to put that away, too). I mean, it's just been a history of deferring or putting aside something. So when he was taken hostage, I just had to put everything else out of my

mind and concentrate on that. I also called all my training in the Foreign Service to bear, even though I felt I had been “dismissed” by the Foreign Service.

Q: Oh, you...now I'm interested in that...

LAINGEN: I mean that — you talk about Mrs. Matthews feeling this — I really felt 1972 (when the Policy Directive on spouses was issued) very strongly — that we were “dismissed.”

Q: Cast adrift.

LAINGEN: Cast adrift. This is another thing I don't think my husband understands to this day. “But, honey, haven't you enjoyed the Foreign Service?” Well, yes, there are high points, but I think it was the total identity that I had been led to believe I was a part of it — and a vital part of it — and it gnawed on me all through Malta. I did it (carried out the role), but it still gnawed, terribly — the lack of recognition that I was out there doing a job for the U.S. Government. That's the way I really felt about it.

So, here we come to the hostage crisis, a terribly public, international crisis, where you are on television. I think most people recognize and say, okay, this is the wife of the Chief of Mission (and how she behaves reflects not only on her husband, but perhaps on the whole Foreign Service or on Americans on the world scene). If I had gone on television and cried nightly, if I'd flown off to Iran and called the President stupid or the Government's policy stupid, I think I would have heard in two minutes just how private a person I was! (I would have been reprimanded by the very Department of State which had proclaimed me to be a private person with no responsibility to my husband's career). I mean, I'm being sarcastic and I realized I wasn't a private person. You can't be a private person. You are a part of the Foreign Service and particularly when you are on the public stage like that. It's a public life. How can you be a private person in a public life? See, this is what Sandra Gotlieb found out. You cannot be a private person in a public arena. There's no way.

So, the hypocrisy of this official policy has just gnawed no end at me. And I got no support from the Department in that role. I got sort of superficial support. Well, not even that, not even that.

Q: Did you call weekly, daily, hourly to find out?

LAINGEN: No, no.

Q: Did you wait for them?

LAINGEN: Well, I started — I went down to the Department, I will say that. They opened up this Task Force Center and you could go up there. But after awhile, you felt in the way. They were not giving you any jobs to do.

But along about March of 1980, five months after the takeover, I went to lunch over at Annapolis with some (former) POW's wives and they had been very supportive. One of them was Alice Stratton, and she is now head of the Navy Family Office or whatever. She said you need to get organized — the families need to get organized. I said, yes, I really feel that's something that I have been feeling I'm not getting any support from the Department, but the families have all these questions — legal, financial, repatriational, (medical, administrative), whatever — they aren't getting the answers. The one thing that was coming up was should we pay our income taxes? We just weren't getting the answers.

Anyway, I called the families together in March of 1980 and we founded FLAG right then and there, formed the family group, the Family Liaison Action Group. In the meantime, I had been working on the yellow ribbon campaign. That started because a Washington Post lady (Barbara Parker) called me and said, “You seem so calm.” And she said we noticed that the psychiatrists are saying that their mental patients are so angry at Iran that they've coined this phrase “Irage” that they're seeing it in their patients. And she said they are wondering how you manage.

(Break in tape)

We were talking how the yellow ribbon got started because the Washington Post woman called me and asked “how do you stay calm”. So we talked about religion and the support I was getting from family. At that time, we had a son at Annapolis and I had former POW wives supporting me. So, then I said, the one thing that bothers me is the kind of demonstrations that are going on. At that time, there were some college students throwing dog food at Iranian demonstrators in our streets. They were showing signs of this Irage. I said that just wouldn't help our situation. “Tell them to do something constructive, because we need a great deal of patience. Just tell them to tie a yellow ribbon around the old oak tree.” I don't know why it came to me, except that I had put a yellow ribbon up myself on a large oak in my yard. And she said, “Have you done this?” And I said, “yes.” She lived in Reston, Virginia, and she said “I think it's a wonderful thing,” so she started hanging ribbons in Reston. One night, it was snowing and my doorbell rang. I went to the door and there was a woman there, who turned out to be an AID wife. And there was her station wagon with the children and the dog hanging out of it, and she said “I have just come to tell you that I have appointed myself Chairman of the Yellow Ribbon Committee — my sister and I.” (They were Gail Carlson and Karen Helfert). And so, those two started hanging ribbons all over Washington, DC, up Massachusetts Avenue and around the White House.

Then eventually, I was asked to the White House to hang a yellow ribbon on a Georgia Maple, so I went with Mrs. Carter and did that. Then, I was asked up to Capitol Hill to put a yellow ribbon around the Sam Rayburn Oak tree (the night of the State of the Union Address). And then, I went to Wye Oak, Maryland, where the largest oak tree in the United States is located, with Governor Harry Hughes. It was so large that instead of a ribbon, we had a bolt of yellow (cloth) and he went around one side of the tree and I went around the other (laughs), and we swathed this giant tree with yellow.

Well, it did just snowball. And then, No Greater Love (a humanitarian organization under the direction of Carmela LaSpada) went to the unions and they produced this pin. We began giving those out all over the United States. Then, we worked with Girl Scouts (and Boy Scouts), veterans, and various Junior Chambers of Commerce, and it became a national (symbol). I think Dotty Morefield was putting up billboards in California. (laughs) And bumper stickers. And it just spread.

There was one thing that interested me about the American people. They do love their gimmicks, and we had to be very careful of those people who began exploiting our situation to make money off of our trauma. There was one woman I remember particularly in North Carolina, I think, who began putting out bulletins to people and selling them or selling bumper stickers and T-shirts and things like that, but I think I have always been amazed at the way that the hostage situation took hold of the American people's imagination. I just think the time was ripe after Vietnam and Watergate. We were feeling very down about ourselves. If you recall, Jimmy Carter was going up to Camp David into the mountains, calling all these people in and saying, “What's the matter with the United States?” At the time the takeover took place (in Iran), he was in fact at Camp David doing that very thing. There was a tremendous amount of being down about ourselves as Americans. I think with the Iran crisis, people began to say, “No more, this is it.”

Q: We bottomed out with the Iran crisis.

LAINGEN: Who are they to treat us this way? We were over there to try to establish a new relationship with the revolutionary government of Iran. In fact, I have a letter from my husband to that effect. But it was too late. Our relationship with the Shah was so deep. After all, thirty years of supporting him and they (the mullahs) weren't trusting of us at all. And when we did bring the Shah into this country, they thought we were going to get him well and send him back. So we could understand that.

At any rate, I think that's one reason why the yellow ribbon really took off, because people were feeling the need to be united about something at last and feel good about themselves. We were really a good people and we didn't mean bad by the Iranians. And it was such a ludicrous situation, holding diplomats hostage like that, even though there had been a precedent in 1949 in Mukden, China.

Q: I didn't know that...

LAINGEN: There were Americans held for thirteen months. I've met one of the women, Mary Hubbard, a Foreign Service officer actually, and she later married one of the fellows that she was held captive with. And you never heard of that situation. That's why I feel the Iran thing just happened at a time of history when we were ripe for that. At any rate, the yellow ribbon — and then I felt through my experience as an ambassador's wife and then having served under ambassadors' wives who took their jobs, in quotes, seriously, that my training meant that I had a certain responsibility for the families of the hostages — just as Bruce was feeling for his colleagues in Iran. I felt a responsibility there. I had not necessarily one to the U.S. Government (with its official policy of not caring what I did), but probably...

Q: In human terms...

LAINGEN: Yes, but mostly to my husband, that I had to behave. But also, I just felt a responsibility and that's why this family organization came about. I felt it just had to be done. We had to have input into decisions that were being made (for us and for the hostages). It wasn't that we were going against the Government (and the military services were very concerned about that when we organized FLAG), but we had to have that option if we wanted to. (That independence, at one point, became obvious when the terrorists said they might release the hostages into the custody of the families, not to the United States Government).

Q: I've always wondered if they notified you that they were going to make that rescue attempt. Did you know about that?

LAINGEN: Well, that's interesting, because I had been told by someone, who will remain forever a secret...

Q: ...a secret, yes...

LAINGEN: Because those were things that were discussed in National Security Council meetings, and no one was supposed to know. This fellow, however, wanted me to pressure the Government to do it (the raid). He had heard and he had been in Iran and said it was quite possible. He showed me a map. He said this was where we could land (in the desert), we could fly into Teheran and gas everybody in sight, including the hostages. I was in such a daze, I kind of listened superficially to him, but I said “well, I don't feel that that is my business”, (yet I wanted to believe it was possible). Interestingly, with three children in the Navy and kind of an idealistic attitude about America, I felt we could do anything if we really put our mind to it. At any rate, the families — at one of our meetings — they sensed that something was afoot.

We had run through everything, including Kurt Waldheim's trip to Iran, which had fallen through, and Ham Jordan dressing up with a red wig and speaking to lawyers in Paris and some idiotic things. And everything had failed. And so, we just felt something was afoot. The American people were getting antsy. I remember one family member saying that she wanted to talk to Brzezinski. I said it seemed to me that Lloyd Cutler was probably closer to the President and maybe more sensible. So, I called David Newsom (the Under Secretary of State) in the Department, and I said the families are really worried that something is going to be done militarily and they want to talk to Brzezinski or Lloyd Cutler. He said, “Before you do that, let me talk to them.” So, we set up a night meeting, I remember, at the State Department. In the meantime, one of the mothers had flown off to

Iran and four of the wives had gone to Europe. (Newsom) passed a circular around at that meeting which said that the rest of us could not go anywhere.

Q: These people just went off on their own without telling anyone.

LAINGEN: Yes, right. Well, I don't know about the four that went to Europe to talk with Heads of State. No, I've never been sure about, that visit. Perhaps Jimmy Carter set it up himself, thinking that, you know, he would make it (look like) the idea of the family members — that they were doing it. But I think there was Government support there, because I tried to get to the bottom of it, who financed that visit, and I never have (found out). I was very angry because we had set up FLAG (to act independently of Government and I was a founding Board member, but kept in the dark about a lot of things). And supposedly, they went under the auspices of FLAG, but suddenly (so it wouldn't look like the Government was behind it), we were strapped with an $8000 bill and not told where the money was coming from.

Q: They presented you with the bill?

LAINGEN: Yes, these women — and particularly one, who did everything by fait accompli — and she will remain nameless — but that was the way FLAG was beginning to be run, which was not to my liking at all. At any rate, there were these five (the one in Iran and the four in Europe) who were not at this meeting. I remember saying out myself that I really resented particularly the one going to Iran, because, I said, that if we had wanted a spokesperson from the families to go to Iran, she would not have been the one to be chosen. I thought she might do our cause a great deal of damage. There were other people involved — fifty two others — besides her son. I remember one of the young teenagers in another family saying: “And I resent your resentment." Well, it turned out that his mother had already bought her ticket to go to Iran! (laughs) And I didn't know that.

David Newsom said “Nothing is going to happen, nothing is going to happen, I assure you. We are keeping the hostages first in our minds and we will do nothing to endanger

their lives.”So everyone left the meeting feeling very good and calm. At one or two o'clock in the morning, the phone rang and it was Henry Precht. He said, “First of all, Bruce is all right, I'll tell you that. Secondly, there was a rescue mission and it was aborted and eight commandos have been killed.” The interesting thing is, because I had had some background of this (concerning a possible raid) from this other person, I wasn't shocked. I wasn't surprised. I was really feeling, well, my goodness, what to think about David Newsom? Either he didn't know about the raid or it was the biggest ruse anyone had ever pulled on the families. So, I fell right back to sleep after (Henry and I) hung up. The next thing I knew it was about five o'clock in the morning and the media people were banging on the door, just banging on the door, and it woke me up with a start — and my son. But we hid out and didn't turn on any lights and waited until they had left. About 7:30, I went to church, because I was feeling not only sad about the eight that had been killed, but I felt sorry for Jimmy Carter. I thought what a terrible decision he had had to make, that he was that desperate and then it failed. (I also wondered why there had been so much effort the night before to keep the rest of us from flying off to Iran. Was the woman who went there going to be gassed along with everyone else and put on the helicopters? Had she been allowed to go to throw everyone off about the raid?)

I have a funny story to add to that, because Bruce's brother, Arvid, who is still in Minnesota on the farm — He became something of a folk hero out there and is still very Norwegian in his whole outlook and speech — had to be called and informed about the raid. I had been told by the State Department — don't comment to the press about the rescue mission. So, I called Arvid out there and said, “Don't say anything if the media calls you. You just don't have any comments.” He said, in his Norwegian accent, “Tew lett. The helicopter from Minneapolis landed in the fields. They cem tew interview me about the aborted rescew mission.” And I said, “Ohhhh, Arvid, what did you say?” And he said: “Well, I said if President Carter had succeeded, he wooed be a heeroo.” (laughs) I said, “Well, that's fine. You said the right thing.” He is just such a character.Anyway, I came home (from church) and I felt at peace, because Bruce was all right. I called the White House (I had a contact

there), and I said, “I just want President Carter to know how badly I feel for him, that I support him, and it's a shame it failed, but if you can possibly hit 'em again, hit 'em harder, that sort of thing.” At any rate, the next day, which was Sunday or Monday, I believe, I had friends come down from New York. They said, “Oh, we saw your telegram in the New York Times, the telegram you sent to the President.” And I said: “The what?” “Yes,” they said, “it said that you supported the rescue mission, hit 'em again, don't despair.” That was the time when I was really angry with President Carter, because I had wanted just a private message to him, that I knew how badly he must feel, I had prayed over it, and then he — needing desperately some support (from the families) for it, let my message go to the New York Times without asking me at all. (This put me in a difficult position with the other hostage families). It wasn't that I went against President Carter, but I just really wasn't as happy with him after that. And then...

Q: Do you think it was his decision or somebody else's?

LAINGEN: It could have been somebody else's.

Q: But still, he let it go through. He was a man who paid attention to detail. He knew that it was going through...

LAINGEN: Yes. Right. And then, Mary McGrory called me. At that time, they were saying that the rescue mission was a political maneuver. Did I think that Carter had done it in order to win the election? He was beginning to campaign and beginning to see that his Rose Garden policy of staying close to the White House and doing nothing but hostages was hurting him.

I said I refused to make any comments that way. The only thing I will say is that, anybody who turns this tremendous American surge of patriotism or whatever it is we are feeling into a political gimmick, makes a big mistake, I think. I don't see how anybody could win

an election if he does that. They've got to stay above politics where this Iran thing is concerned.

Anyway, it's sad, because it did turn out to be his (Carter) undoing. Most people, as they pointed out today with Reagan in Grenada and Reagan in Libya, that the American people do support their Presidents in quick little wars, but they certainly didn't with Carter in Iran. It turned against him very much. It killed him. At any rate, the more I thought about the rescue mission, too, I realized — after it failed — that America was not as capable as I thought we were. (A raid into that populous area was impossible and, no doubt, many would have been killed, even some of the hostages. When Secretary Vance resigned in protest, I became very skeptical about the raid). I mean, what in the world were these helicopters failing for in the desert? And I felt particularly bad, because, as I say, I had one son at the Naval Academy and another one at the University of Minnesota in NROTC and a third one coming along who is now at Annapolis, all of them wanting to fly. Our middle son now is a helicopter pilot, and I — you know — he recently took off from an aircraft carrier and the plane burst into flames and he had to quickly get back on the aircraft carrier. He almost dunked in the ocean! There's so much talk about missiles, spending money on missile weapons, when the things we really need in warfare are falling apart. These helicopters are so old that it was very disillusioning to me. The more I thought about it, too, I thought how are they going to rescue my husband at the Foreign Ministry?

Q: That would have been my thought.

LAINGEN: You know, somebody said they were going to scale the wall. I have a funny story to tell about that because I was very lucky, I could get mail through to Bruce, and at one point I encouraged the families to put yellow ribbons in their letters (to the hostages). But they said, Oh, but our husbands don't receive any mail. And I said “But the militants do, and they will open these letters and the yellow ribbons will fall out. It will have an impact and they will say, 'what does this mean?'” The Iranians are a very devious people and they see plots in everything. And this is exactly what happened, because Richard

Queen told us when he came home that he did get the yellow ribbon. But they all (the guards) said: “What does this mean?” Richard said, “It's not a plot. It just meant they haven't forgotten me. We are waiting patiently for you.” But they (the guards) never really believed it.

Well, Bruce received his ribbon and pasted it up on the window. One day, the guard from down below (in the courtyard) at the Foreign Ministry saw the ribbon and came rushing into the room. “What is this? You've got to take it down!” He thought it was a signal to the commandos that this was the room (in which the hostages were held). Even the guards in Iran knew something was going to happen. They were beginning to get very antsy, of course, thinking rightly that a raid was an impossible task. (But after the raid occurred, even though it failed), they were beginning to get frightened.

And then he (Bruce) tells the story that a few months later, again, a guard came rushing into the room. He had seen something on the window. It was bird doo. And Bruce said “I'll be darned if I'll wash that window!” But they were that skitterish about things. They thought there were plots in everything and that we were very clever.

The more I thought about the rescue mission, I thanked the good Lord that it really didn't succeed. I was always, publicly, even when Bruce got home, we never said anything against it, because we marveled at the fact there were other Americans willing to put their lives on the line to save their fellow Americans. So that has always been something we don't want to shatter, (to give the impression) that those men went on a mission that was stupid. We certainly didn't want to say that to their families. But I do look back on it and think it was an act of desperation. We had been through everything we possibly could and then, in April, this mission failed. After that, the whole summer through 1980, there was nothing — nothing, absolutely nothing going on.

Q: No initiations...negotiations?

LAINGEN: Nothing, they had turned over every stone possible, and also the families were beginning to feel that perhaps we ought to be quiet and just wait until the Iranians saw that nothing was happening and they'd get tired of it, tired oall the publicity. Perhaps too much publicity had lengthened the hostage crisis. So then, we tried to calm everybody down, and that didn't work. By then, the American people had really been stirred up too much. (laughs) (That summer, too, Richard Queen returned because he had developed Multiple Sclerosis. The family members took that to mean that their loved ones were probably in pretty good health. Also, that the Iranians had no intention of killing any of them. It then became a matter of waiting for the Iranians to figure out a way to release the hostages without losing “face”. They had made their points about their grievances. The Shah died that July, so they knew he wouldn't return. And they'd just about squeezed every value out of the hostage issue to unite their people behind the new revolutionary government or Majlis).

I think what really completed the hostage crisis was the Iran-Iraq War, where Iran had used the hostages to put their Government together with the mullahs, the clericals. So then, they had served that purpose and now they (the Iranians) were distracted by the war. Also, I remember that the Iranian banker, Nobari, who was in Paris, finally saw that the freezing of the assets was killing Iran and he went to tell Ghotbzadeh and some of them — and Bani Sadr, who knew economics — that the hostage crisis was now beginning to turn against them. (One of them came to the United Nations and saw how isolated Iran had become on the world scene when they received no support concerning the invasion of the Iraqis). And then, I think the prospect of Ronald Reagan coming in also had something to do with ending it.

Q: It seemed to me it gave them an opportunity with Carter out and Reagan coming in, it was an opportunity that they seized. Now, whether we planted the thought with them or someone there thought it up themselves...

LAINGEN: Well, I do think that's true, but I also think that they panicked, because the last few days before the Inauguration, when all the business with the Algerians was going on andWarren Christopher (was) flying back and forth, the feeling was that the day of the Inauguration was the deadline, and if they didn't come through and agree on it and they didn't get what they wanted from the Americans, then Reagan — who knows what Reagan would do — bomb Kharg Island or do something? — that was his reputation then. So that was definitely the deadline for them. They had to get that done.

But it's interesting that weeks before that, they did come and get Bruce and the others out of the Foreign Ministry, held a gun to their heads (a lot of people don't know this) and those three were in solitary confinement in prison for three weeks. And no beds there. They slept on cement floors, their teeth chattering. It was just awful. I was informed that Bruce had gone from the Foreign Ministry. They didn't know where. And I remember Sheldon Krys saying he hoped that I would not worry too much. I said, “No, as a matter of fact, I felt it was the beginning of the end. Bruce might be in prison and it might be awful, but there was something moving. It's movement, and I think it's a step out.” And that's exactly what happened. So...

Q: Was Sheldon Krys in on those negotiations?

LAINGEN: Oh, yes, I'm sure he was. (Perhaps not the monetary negotiations, but certainly involved with the hostages' release).

Q: He came as Ambassador to Trinidad just as we were leaving. I had one afternoon briefing session with him and saw him a few times afterwards. Very competent.

LAINGEN: Very competent.

(One thing that made it difficult was the lack of esprit de corps among the families. I mean, we had never served together, so that was one of the drawbacks. And there were all different services involved. There's a study done of fourteen hostage wives. Those of us

who had served the longest in the Foreign Service expected the most, yet felt we had received the least support. Those foreign-born spouses in the group expected nothing and were deeply grateful for whatever they received in the way of support. They had no great expectations of the Department, which was perhaps a cultural difference. And the military wives felt they received the greatest support, which they did, and in return kept their allegiance to those services in tact. I believe Sheldon Krys and other Department managers did the best they could under the circumstances, but they had much to learn from the Iran crisis in the management of families during a crisis. It was always a source of great disappointment to me, for instance, that not once during the crisis did any of my husband's colleagues offer to take our youngest son to a basketball game or call to inquire about the house or other personal matters. It was up to us unite ourselves and support one another in that personal way.

I suppose at posts overseas, when crisis strikes, Foreign Service personnel exhibit more esprit de corps and community cohesion than was evident to us here in Washington. Several of us wrote a report for the State Department with suggestions on methods of handling families in crisis, andI am happy to say, that crisis managers are beginning to include family members in the terrorism equation. At least, now, they are seen as “indirect victims” and that their reactions are not mental problems, but human reactions to stress. I am working with NOVA now in regard to the families of the hostages in Lebanon and have contributed to a video tape for the Overseas Briefing Center which will be disseminated to our posts abroad.

Q: Do you have all of this in writing anywhere?

LAINGEN: Well, I did keep a diary. It is interesting to look back at it, because I was so angry. Anger is a part of the cycles that you go through and, of course, we went through the cycles many times, because it was an open-ended grief. If our husbands had died — you would go through the cycles and that would be the end. You'd end up with acceptance. But it just went up and down for 444 days — despair, depression...

Q: ...an erratic stock market.

LAINGEN: And I see it now with these hostage families (in Lebanon) — the same thing. You knew you were angry, but there wasn't much you could do. You tried to focus your anger. Many of them (the families) focused it on the State Department. That was another thing I told them (the crisis managers) that “you mustn't take it personally, because anger is very natural. They're going to have to find someplace to put their anger and it probably will be focused on you (the managers).”

But what we did, in our family, was put up a dart board of Khomeini and threw darts at it in our house. That kind of thing helped get it out. I saw in my diary, looking back in it, you could see the anger. We didn't call them Shiites, for instance. (laughs).

Q: (laughs) I can imagine.

LAINGEN: And I'm really sort of sad, because the letters that I wrote to Bruce show that anger. If I'd had my eye on history or something, but I just was constantly pouring it out...

Q: Oh, no, I think it probably was natural to let the anger come out. Would you be willing to let the history center look at that diary?

LAINGEN: (laughs) Nooo way.

Q: No way? Would you be willing to edit it?

LAINGEN: Well, that's what I want to do, to write a book from it. That's in the future. Why I have put it off so long, I don't know, except I think the homecoming and the getting back to normal has been amazingly long and very difficult..

Q: I was going to ask you if there had been any change in your pre-Iran attitude and post-hostage period.

LAINGEN: Well, yes, of course. I had become much more independent and mentally retired from the Foreign Service. A long separation like that usually means that nothing will ever be the same again, and it takes a great deal of commitment to the marriage and love on the part of everyone in the family to adjust. I had never liked Iran, as I told you, and I'm afraid that the hostage crisis did nothing to better my estimation of the country. Bruce has been much more forgiving than I.

The thing that surprised me most was how the anger remained for such a long time afterward. I thought it would disappear once the hostages were home. I finally came to the conclusion that the anger stemmed from the whole upsetting trauma in our lives, not from anyone or anything specifically. What they did in Iran was wrong, and there's no two ways about it, and if they haven't learned that lesson, it's too bad for all of us. With the continuing incidents of terrorism, it seems they haven't, and they are still taking hostages in Beirut. But sources tell me that Iranians are suffering greatly today and, although the revolutionary fervor is beginning to subside, it is about 10% of the hard-lined fundamentalists who continue to run the country.

There's so much we need to know about the families, how they react, how they cope.

Q: You must have had a feeling that you had to keep this alive. You had to keep it alive with the Department. With the Administration. With the public and how best to do this.

LAINGEN: Well, yes and no. I don't think we thought much about that actually, because I think all of us felt the injustice of the whole thing. I think the American people felt that right from the beginning, so we didn't need to keep it alive.

Q: You really thought you had public support. See, I wasn't aware of that.

LAINGEN: I don't think we had to, no I don't think so. Now this group of family members (in Lebanon) don't have that attention. It's really awful, because the captors don't seem to crave the publicity themselves, the militants, the terrorists. They have made one plea

(demand) to get the terrorists in Kuwait released, and that's it. Take it or leave it, they say. They're not trying to use the hostages to form a government and have their people rally around them.

Q: Of course, it's pretty scary...

LAINGEN: It's very much scarier, particularly if they've murdered one, which they think they have. This Buckley. I expect they'd stop at nothing. What's to keep them — if they, for instance, this thing with Qadhafi — it's very scary for them, because the terrorists could pop these off and take new hostages as a protest against the raid on Libya.

Q: How did you feel about this Gulf of Sidra thing.

LAINGEN: Well, I'm against it, I really am.

Q: I am too. Retaliation...

LAINGEN: Makes me squirm. You have to think what the end result will be if you want to twist this little twerp into the ground. Everybody knows he's a twerp, so why build him up with sympathy from around the world. Why stimulate the only thing he has, which is terrorism, why stimulate that?

Q: Why give him an excuse for striking out at innocent, uninvolved people?

LAINGEN: Particularly, as I say, with three boys in the Navy, I sure don't want my sons involved in such raids.

[Here there was an interruption on the tape and when the interview was resumed, the topic of the Role of the Spouse in the Foreign Service was picked up again.]

LAINGEN: I remember going up to Peshawar. There was a young wife who had just had a new baby she was nursing. They were at this reception. We were just visitors, Bruce

and I. She poured out her heart to me: “I have to get home to nurse this baby, but I don't dare, because my husband is already in trouble with the Consul General, and you know, if I go home...” I said, “This is absolutely ludicrous. Your baby needs you. That baby comes first.” And she said: “Not in the Foreign Service.” And she said: “I'm just dying to get home, because I need to, but I can't, I don't dare.” Well, many things like that I saw going on that I just couldn't believe.

I was reprimanded by my husband's boss's wife, but there's a long story to that, too, where I had merely suggested that possibly we needed a welcome committee at this post, because a woman who had come in temporarily was not welcomed and not called upon and was complaining bitterly. And I happened to make this remark in front of this woman, unbeknownst to me, who was supposed to be in charge of her visit and evidently hadn't done her homework. So she let me have it with both guns blazing. I made a tactical error, you see, in a sweet, little naive way. As I said, there were many horror stories that I could pit against anyone else's, but I swore that when and if Bruce became an ambassador, I would not ever forget and never treat junior wives in that horrible way. But what I didn't expect was that when Bruce did become an ambassador that the rug would be pulled out from under me. No longer was I to be the leader of these people. And certainly it left you with this terrible vacuum, this feeling of being a non-person (in a career or a lifestyle which you had made your own and to which you had devoted the better part of your life). And this is what I think our husbands don't understand.

Q: Because it didn't happen to them.

LAINGEN: Didn't happen to them.

Q: No, nothing changed for them really.

LAINGEN: But talk about mid-life crisis! There is an identity crisis when you have other wives, like the one we mentioned who went back to be an officer, rubbing your nose in the fact that you did not keep your career up, and that you are a person in your own right, and

that the partnership, the two-for-the-price-of-one, is a very stupid situation to be in. (The radical chic in the seventies were saying we weren't very intelligent to serve as partners with our husbands). I mean, you really end up thinking “what have I done? I've put all my eggs in my husband's basket and I'm not ME, I'm “the wife of”. It really was devastating to me. And not only that, it made me so angry in Malta to be put in that position of having to do it. There was no way I could not do it without being criticized. That, I really resented. I just vowed after that “never again”, and then, of course, the hostage thing came up and I was stuck again! I was really stuck.

Q: But, a different situation...

LAINGEN: Well, it was different, but it was worse because it was public. And so many people say to me, “You can do what you want to do.” I think maybe if you are a Political Counselor's wife and downwards, yes, perhaps. But I don't think if you are a DCM or Ambassador's wife, Charg# or Consul General's wife, I do not think the choices are there. Am I wrong? I don't know.

Q: No, I think you're right.

LAINGEN: I mean, the choices are there if...

Q: If you want to make a “thing” of it.

LAINGEN: Yes, if you want to make a thing of it.

Q: I mean, and a choice too often these days is a DCM's wife lives in Washington on a Separate Maintenance Allowance. Who ever dreamed that one up? It was just a death knell as far as the Service was concerned. If anything, as I said in that report, there should be a maintenance allowance to try to keep people together. My question has always been what made these women act that way? When they became ambassadors' wives? Insecurity, what?

LAINGEN: Well, I think it's human nature. You get a little power, a sense of power...

Q: Well, you saw that in the hostage crisis, didn'you?

LAINGEN: Oh, yes. But you know, it's interesting, I call the Foreign Service an Upstairs/ Downstairs life. I think — I've seen it recently — just this week. I've seen it working with women in AAFSW who have been ambassadors' wives. When you're at post and you're an ambassador's wife you are catered to very much. I saw this in Malta. It almost nauseated me. The Maltese almost climbing up your back, pawing you, (hoping to be invited to the American Residence). The servants bowing down, scraping.

When you come home — and I always tried to keep this in my head — suddenly you are nine servants rolled into one, and the kids are not showing you any respect, they are not picking up their rooms, and you're the cook and chauffeur and everything. There's no respect, but you still have this overblown feeling about yourself. And I saw it just the other day in a meeting, where a woman who had been an ambassador's wife recently, and someone came up and said something to her, and she turned and said: “Don't you know who I am?” They lose sight of who they really are (or aren't), and I think it's that kind of a life — a very superficial life — unless you keep your feet right smack on the ground about who you are and what you're up to. You do become an Imelda Marcos, very quickly.

Q: The superficiality bothers me a lot. The pretense, and I see it now. I religiously look at McNeil-Lehrer every night just to try to find out what's going on, objectively. And when I see our Secretary of State or Assistant Secretary of State mouthing the Administration line on something that is wrong in my mind. It just makes me realize how many years our husbands have had to put up with that.

What was it you said — in Pakistan, there was the ambassador who spoke out about Mrs. Kennedy and suddenly he was no longer ambassador there. To have to toe the Administration line, to have to toe the Embassy line or the Consul General line, whatever,

and not be yourself, that takes its toll too. And maybe women are affected with stress or by — what is your lovely term for stress — psycho-motor retardation?

LAINGEN: It's kind of a physical dyslexia (laughs). That has been my thinking about it, but I've been very careful when I've worked on the Spouse Report because I realized that there are older women, like the other women you interviewed, who were more in tune with that older life and understood it. They would never have seen themselves as dragon ladies or any of these things as anachronistic or unfair or rigid. They would have seen them quite differently. I understand that.

Q: She saw herself, when she became an ambassador's wife, she saw herself as an impresario, being able to put into effect all that she'd learned throughout the years.

LAINGEN: I understand that, because what was so ludicrous to me was being told that I was free, that the things were not my responsibility, but my husband's. (I'm speaking of representational responsibilities, not substantive Embassy work). I could do them if I wanted (I was told), voluntarily, but it wasn't necessary. But then when he became ambassador (I saw how little choice there was). He left, by the way, very quickly in the worst winter Washington had ever seen, in 1977. He said because Jimmy Carter had been elected and he was a Ford appointee, he was afraid he would be a lame duck appointee and recalled, so he scooted very quickly to Malta, leaving me with everything (the shopping, the sorting, the repairing and renting of the house, selling of the car, the packing, and the putting of one child in college and so forth).

Anyway, after being told how free I was, I was paid a call by Joan Wilson, who was in charge of the Overseas Briefing Center, and handed a tome as thick as my Columbia Dictionary on how to be an ambassador's wife. And I said, “But wait a minute.” In the first place, all of this information — how to dress, how to set a table, how to arrange flowers, what to wear when you're photographed, how to get off an airplane — these are all things I had in my training. I've been working toward this moment. But now, if I'm free (of these

responsibilities), what is this? I don't understand (what this tome of information is all about). To me, it's a very hypocritical policy.Am I free or am I not? (And if I am, don't tell me how I'm supposed to behave; and if I'm not, why not recognize that fact officially?)

Q: Did she get upset with you?

LAINGEN: No. She said,"I understand". (Joan Wilson was one also trained in the earlier generation and she had worked on the Forum Report of 1977, I believe). But — it was sort of — well, the younger ones are beginning to understand. I get this line now, too, that there are some that want to know about representation, the skills and so forth. (I have also been asked, "Don't you think representation is important?" And would I not be willing to help train some of these younger women in that role — serve as a role model? And to the first question I would answer "yes, I think representation is very important and I wish the Department thought so too." And to the second question I would answer "no, I will no longer be exploited by the Department). Well, I don't think we're ever going to go back to those days.

Q: When I saw that article on the front page of the AAFSW News yesterday, I thought Phyllis Schafly was running amok through AAFSW (laughs). I really tried to make sure that the woman was serious. That's going too far.

LAINGEN: There's no explanation of where that came from or who she is. Is there?

Q: Well, I think there's something at the end that didn't make much sense to me. I really did look at it twice to see if it was a satire or...

LAINGEN: I think it was a news article, something, but I wondered too.

Q: Oh, here, now, I think this should have been at the head of it, but it says: "The following has been written by a Foreign Service spouse in an attempt to define the specific qualities

or characteristics which exemplify what Foreign Service spouses are today," but it says the following article — so that should have been put at the top, I guess.

LAINGEN: She does have format problems.

Q: The recent renderings in the press generalized the Foreign Service spouse "in ways that did not reflect reality. In future issues of this newsletter we hope to explore just what qualities today's Foreign Service spouse has acquired and how those unique qualities offer potential not only for herself but for her community as well. If you would like to contribute your thoughts on this matter, please send in articles, one-pagers, to the News Editor." And this was written by Karen Lundahl. Is she the Editor of the Newsletter?

LAINGEN: No, Lois Turco.

Q: Who's Karen Lundahl?

LAINGEN: (I don't know). I think that was poor. No explanation of who she is, where it was printed.

Q: It's called Portrait of a Foreign Service spouse.

LAINGEN: But, you know, one of the things I learned in doing the Spouse Report is that you're not talking about a monolithic group of people. They're all ages, all interests, all talents, and maybe one of the fallacies is that an ambassador's wife is (supposed to be) an automatic leader. Maybe she's not.

Q: Maybe she's not.

LAINGEN: And she isn't, most likely.

Q: Most likely not.

LAINGEN: And...

Q: And the interesting thing that's coming out of these interviews. Mrs. Mathews said she objected to the 1972 Directive because she said that you cannot put into writing how Foreign Service wives are going to behave. She's absolutely right. Every interview is different. It has become such an absorbing pastime. It's wonderful. I had a retired ambassador's wife tell me yesterday at lunch: "I came in at the top, I stayed at the top, and I started pushing people around right away." I said, "Can I interview you?" She said: "I have problems with my eyes so I want to get that straightened out." I can't wait to get her on tape! (laughs) She's an enormously intelligent woman and has known my husband's family for years and years. And my mother-in-law worried that she would never get married because she wouldn't be able to find anyone smart enough for her. And then, this pearl dropped from her lips as we were driving home, and I thought, I really must penetrate this and find out her viewpoints. She's extremely articulate.

LAINGEN: Well, I think that's wonderful, but I think it's misplaced energy. And I think we're glad to be rid of the "dragon ladies". I'm glad we're rid of them. I never had any doubt about that. But what I do feel — doubt — is the separation of the identity and the interests of the spouse — those who are interested in the Foreign Service. The lack of encouragement to keep them in, to keep them going, so that the role (means something and has purpose). The role has ended up being so degraded that none of us really want to get near it with a ten foot pole.

Q: Well, I think the FLO office is responsible for this.

LAINGEN: Sure, it is.

Q: That you're not employed; you're useless.

LAINGEN: That's right, but the Department is too. I believe the official policy and putting in a Separate Maintenance just encourages this separation of families (and mutual objectives in representation abroad).

Q: It was self-destructive.

LAINGEN: I mean, who wants to go — I would not want to go overseas today if my role is simply to dress up night after night and go talk to people that I really don't care that much about.

If I felt I was a part of it and it was recognized that I had a role to play (that was meaningful), sure, (I'd do it). Otherwise, it's just more years of deferring what you really want to do in your life. What is you. And that is so wrong. There must be some way women can be a part of the life in which they must lead their lives — If they are going to stay married.

Q: Well, your report says that the young woman who has limited representational responsibilities, her family — she's the happiest — so what's our problem? What's the problem with the Department that they can't see that?

(Here again the interview was interrupted and never completed. Penne Laingen has added an addendum to this discussion.)

LAINGEN: Our report said, yes, that the woman who has few responsibilities in representational work and has time to spend on her own family and her own interests is the happiest. It also said that the lowest morale in the Foreign Service is found among Senior Foreign Service spouses who do three times the number of hours in representational work of others and who resent their lack of options and recognition for their contributions. They do not see their work as voluntary — not necessarily in every case — and they are still locked out of employment possibilities because of conflict of interest. Many must give up their jobs and own interests in order to fulfill the expected

role. So far, the only response from the Department to this hypocritical situation has been to warn younger couples coming into the Foreign Service that such is the situation for spouses and that's the way it is, be warned that nothing's bound to change. Compensation for these spouses in the senior ranks and any form of recognition of their contributions have not been forthcoming.

On the presumption that these interviews are to one day be of use to future historians or researchers into the unique peculiarities of Foreign Service spouses — a term which some feel is now extinct — I am adding a summary tape to my interview in order to pull together some of my seemingly contradictory or ambivalent remarks.

From a historical perspective, I look upon my generation of Foreign Service spouses as one caught between the old and the new, riding the cusp of change between an elite, traditional, protocol-conscious group of husbands and wives and a more egalitarian, less-structured Service of individual careerists. My generation of spouses had its fundamental training rooted in the former system, which was based upon a hierarchical system that both husbands and wives belonged to, adhered to, and believed in, so that there was general acceptance by all spouses of the rules of protocol, the privileges of rank, and the demands of the Service upon them. We have also witnessed the dissolution of the hierarchy of spouses which, through a Policy Directive put out in 1972, attempted to abolish some of the abuses of the system by removing spouses from their husbands' efficiency reports and freeing them (supposedly) from the responsibility of representational work.

As I have pointed out in my interview, my first posting to Pakistan was fraught with hardships that today I would not accept, not only because I am older and hopefully more confident in my own abilities, but also because the system as it once was, no longer exists. But before we congratulate ourselves on ridding the Foreign Service of an anachronistic, rigid, and sometimes demeaning system for women, let me hasten to say that — having had a taste of both systems — I feel the Foreign Service has lost more than it has gained

through the changes. Younger spouses will not — perhaps — agree with me, but they do not have the same historical perspective as I.

In any revolution, which surely the women's liberation movement was, the radical chic take their arguments over the cliff in order to bring about fundamental change. Some have said that in the Foreign Service, this revolutionary pendulum swung too far or that women threw the baby out with the bath water. Those of us who protested the 1972 Directive were totally misunderstood. We were called sadomasochists for complying to the rules of protocol and the dictates of senior spouses. And senior spouses — not all of whom were “dragon ladies” — were said to resent the loss of their traditional right to victimize junior spouses. To the contrary, our objections centered more around the loss of our raison d'etre and our sense of belonging to the Foreign Service. For those of us whose husbands were in senior positions, the 1972 Directive seemed hypocritical, for, simply stated, we found it impossible to be private persons in what was essentially a very public life. We did not seem to have the same freedom, the same options or choices of younger spouses to “do our own thing,” which was the cry of the day. Having devoted our lives to the Foreign Service and thinking of it as our own career, the policy had the unfortunate effect of telling us we were no longer needed.

Under the old system, the overriding value that kept us going from post to post was our innate sense of belonging. We felt as much a part of this elite group of people as our husbands. Everything we endured — from boiling vats of water to dropping calling cards, from packing and unpacking our households to attending endless receptions, from parasites and culture shock to performing charitable acts — had purpose and meaning to us as unofficial, people-to-people diplomats. Our contributions were recognized by the U.S. Government, so that we were not excess baggage that our husbands carried along with them, but were instead full-fledged partners in spreading a good American image.

Secondly, the hierarchy of spouses — despite the sometimes unreasonable demands of senior spouses, provided a framework for welcoming newcomers to strange lands and

drawing them into the community. I remember going through a receiving line my first week in Pakistan when the DCM's wife asked me what my interests and talents were, and when I listed them, she said: “Well then, we'll place you in the orphanage to teach the girls how to sew. Yes, it was difficult, like being dunked into a fast-moving stream of activity. There was no time for homesickness, self-pity, nor for that matter for frustration over not having something meaningful to do. We were welcomed and oriented from the first hour of our arrival in Pakistan — hence, my description of having to take my baby to the first dinner party in Karachi.

I believe it was this community orientation and togetherness which made life abroad so appealing in those days. We were pioneers. The majority of Foreign Service couples preferred to live abroad, not only because the living was grand with servants and big houses (which is the general conception people have of us in the Foreign Service), but because we functioned as a community and esprit de corps was evident even in the most difficult hardship posts. There is a great deal to be said for the stiff upper lip attitude, I think, as opposed to continual griping and grievances against the injustices of the lifestyle. And there is much to be said for self-help as a way to overcome psychological problems and low morale.

With all its faults then, the hierarchy of spouses gave our existence meaning and a sense of belonging. When I came home on leave, I felt many of my counterparts in the U.S. led rather prosaic lives compared to mine. How odd now that the coin has turned. Foreign Service spouses today are trying desperately to catch up with their American counterparts by seeking employment or meaningful occupation. There is a great deal of dissatisfaction with the lifestyle which hampers continuity in work skills, which denies spouses the opportunity to find jobs overseas and which inhibits spouses from gaining tenure or writing adequate resumes. There is now a separate maintenance allowance which, in effect, pays spouses to stay home, rather than paying them to go abroad. The representational work

spouses once did as recognized partners in diplomacy has been degraded as something not worthy of intelligent, modern women with independent identities.

In my interview, I speak of the lack of respect for my role in the Iranian hostage crisis. It was not that I desired to be Queen Bee as wife of the Chief of Mission, but I recognized the need for leadership and felt a certain responsibility for the hostage families. I was perhaps a symbol, if you will, or an example to the American people as well as to the other hostage families of how we ought to behave toward Iran in that very public international arena. As I pointed out, had I misbehaved and gone against the Government, I would have been called into the Department for a reprimand, as one other wife was, and told that this was one case where the 1972 Directive could not hold true. I was seen as a part of the Foreign Service and the way I conducted myself would reflect on that Service. My point is, when the chips are down, Foreign Service spouses are a part of the system, no matter how much they may long for independent identities or chaff at doing boring representational work.

Under the new system of separate careerists, which frankly does not meld comfortably with the Foreign Service lifestyle in my opinion, there is more ambivalence among spouses then ever before. Yes, there, are more choices, but they aren't necessarily happier choices. While the Department tries valiantly to come to grips with the problems of tandem couples and spouse employment abroad, they continue to neglect the most serious morale problem in the Service. That is, the lack of recognition for the contributions of spouses, mainly senior spouses, to American diplomacy. Senior spouses continue to carry out three times the number of hours in representational work of other spouses, not because they choose to do so in every case, but primarily because they have to. I recently talked to one of my successors in Malta who was going through the same experience I had faced there. She would like more free time to pursue her own interests, but finds it next to impossible.

Other than staying home on a Separate Maintenance Allowance, which does not help one's marriage, she has no other choice but to conform to the expectations that exist

in Malta for her as the ambassador's wife. What I am saying is — whether pay for such spouses is the answer or not — the Department of State needs to formulate a new policy which recognizes this work as meaningful and important to the U.S. Government. Some say that when younger spouses"come of age" and their husbands become ambassadors, they will not do the representational work. I'm not sure this will be true. I read recently of the wife of the Ambassador to Western Germany, Gayle Burt, who had had to give up a very exciting career as Mrs. Reagan's social secretary in order to fulfill the role that surely is expected of her in that country. And still, ambassador's wives are denied the opportunity to be Community Liaison Officers or be employed within embassies as other wives, the presumption being that, not only is there conflict of interest, but that such spouses choose the role of representation happily and freely. As I said concerning the incident of the Canadian ambassador's wife slapping her social secretary — the social secretary is paid to get it right, while the ambassador's wife — if things go wrong — gets all the blame. This is a system of inequity in my opinion and the reason for such low morale among senior spouses.

It is my feeling — to sum up — that somehow the Foreign Service needs to revive the spirit of partnership. It may be that society's trends will move into a more balanced position which will make this partnership again possible, but it will first require that the representational role be seen as a viable, broader, and more essential one than it is today. In our 1985 Spouse Report, we concluded that the Department of State would do well to recruit, train and send abroad couples (in effect making everyone in the Foreign Service tandem couples), each having separate, but equal, responsibilities to carry out. And there should be more attempt to use the considerable talents and skills of spouses, which would not only be more cost effective than bringing in highly- paid consultants, but give meaning to the context in which spouses must lead their lives overseas. That's the vision I have of the future system, which invokes a bit of the old and the present.

In 1971, upon my return from Afghanistan, where my husband had been Deputy Chief of Mission, serving under Ambassador Robert G. Neumann, I was called by Gladys Rodgers

(in State Management) to attend a meeting in the State Department. It was not made clear to me what the gist of the meeting was, and having been out of the country for three years, I was not fully attuned to the changes that were going on in relation to women, both officers and spouses, in the Foreign Service.

We were ushered into a large room and placed in a circle of chairs around the room. Present were Mrs. William Rogers, wife of the Secretary of State, and Ambassador William Macomber (Secretary for Management); also Melissa Wells, an FSO, women from WAO (Women's Action Organization), secretaries, and one other spouse besides myself, Carol Pardon, who I later learned was in the vanguard of change for spouses in the Service.

My memory of the meeting is hazy, except for a few instances of discussion in which I was directly involved. Melissa Wells was interested in being able to serve at post with her officer husband. Secretaries were mainly disgruntled with their low status abroad. One woman officer, who had been sent home from Saudi Arabia by the Ambassador, because in that conservative society she was not able to perform her duties as well as she might otherwise do, was protesting her dismissal. We were asked to give our reasons for appearing at the meeting, and as luck would have it, the discussion began with the person on my left, making me the last one to answer.

The general feeling was that ambassadors' wives had too much power at post, although one person said that she had found wives of Deputy Chiefs of Mission to be the true “witches” of the Foreign Service. Carol Pardon was promoting her idea of disbanding the hierarchy of spouses. By the time the conversation came around to me, I was forced to say that I was not clear why I was at the meeting, other than to represent the “witches “ of the Foreign Service!

While I agreed that there were enormous problems with the hierarchy of spouses, having my own list of horror stories to tell, and wanted the demands upon spouses lessened, I also suggested that to completely destroy it would not only be to disrupt a system of

welcoming newcomers to post and a method of offering continuity for families between posts, but also to destroy the “raison d'etre” of a great many women who felt they were a part of the Foreign Service. I considered throwing everything out the window would cause a severe morale problem.

At that point, Macomber jumped down my throat, saying that was “just too bad”, since they were causing morale problems among others, and it was time for change. I was not brave enough to continue with my line of thinking, as I could see the die was cast. Little did I know then that the Department was faced with possible litigation and was anxious to get itself off the legal hook.

On the case of the woman officer who had been sent home from Saudi Arabia, however, I did comment that perhaps she would be better off, career-wise, to seek a post in which she could fully participate and succeed; that it was not up to us to change the cultural patterns of other countries; and that the ambassador had probably done her a favor by sending her on somewhere else.

End of interview